

## From Sin To Salvation: Norman Mailer's Protagonists' Survival And Evolution

Dr. Aparna Batra<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Rashmi Bajaj<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Head, Associate Professor Of English, Adarsh P.G Mahila Mahavidyalaya , Bhiwani –Haryana

<sup>2</sup>Professor Of English, Faculty Of Humanities, Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak -Haryana

### Abstract:

American fiction has well captured and critiqued the ethos and essence of American scenario in both pre-war and post-war periods. Survival and evolution have been the pivotal concern of American novelists around which fiction of many a decades revolves. The major post-war novelists like Saul Bellow, Ralph Emerson and Joseph Heller have devised Strategies of Survival and have conveyed their vision through their protagonists. Norman Mailer's avowed aim is "to bring about a revolution in the consciousness of our time". This paper explores his ultimate vision and philosophy of Survival and Evolution as revealed in the acts and ideas of his fictional protagonists. The paper also underlines the contribution of Mailer's vision to American fiction, to American society and to expanded global scenario.

**Keywords:** pre-war, post-war, survival, evolution, strategy of survival, revolution consciousness, vision, global.

### Introduction

Norman Mailer, a leading novelist of the post-war American fiction, is very much concerned with the issue of survival in totalitarian and death-ridden world and has offered his unique radicalist vision as an effective strategy of survival. This self-proclaimed 'best writer in America' (*The Armies Of the Night*) has received a very rough deal at the hands of critics, primarily because the unfortunate mixing up of his 'notorious' life style and literary achievements. The adverse criticism is partially the outcome of the revolutionary ideas expounded by this 'prophet' whose avowed aim is to bring about a "revolution in the consciousness of our time" (*Advertisements for Myself*). This versatile genius has sought to accomplish this through his novels, essays, journalistic writings a play, poems and films. The later years have, however, witnessed a redemption of this radicalist in critical circles and the critics have unravelled the essential Mailer as "Christ with a sword" (Richard Poirier), as "A belligerent prophet" (James Toback) who combines purity of a hipster saint and ruthlessness of great sinner.

### The Novelist's Views and Vision

Mailer's affair with the novel, as McConnell observes: "has been an affair of intelligence as well as of passion" (61). By connecting the lives of his fictional characters to the life of the nation, Mailer has brought out the best and the worst of the internal and external American life. It is quite creditable that a writer who has personally experienced the trauma of the years of depression, the brutality of the Second World War and the Cold War has not yielded to the demons of despair but has presented a unique strategy of survival based on American Existentialism. His profound and original thoughts and visionary philosophy have laid the ground for a 'new kind of man' (*The Art Of Fiction*) who has the ability to express himself in action and alter the society. "Mailer does want to instruct readers" opines S.T Gutman, "in how to live good and brave life" (130-31)

American Existentialism, also known as the 'Philosophy Of Hip', has some similarity to the vision offered by the twentieth century European philosophers, yet it is distinctly different. Mailer shares their concern with the development of the self, problem of death in an alien world, but rejects their atheism and extreme rationalistic and intellectual approach. Committed to a radical social change, he advocates a revision in Marxian vision which elaborates the social and political reality but leaves out psychological experiences. Mailer admires Freud for being 'a discoverer of secrets, mysteries and new questions', but at the same time he finds many instinctually inhibiting aspects of his theory untenable. Mailer's preoccupation gradually shifted from a social revolution to a cultural revolution that would facilitate the realization of all the possibilities of an individual.

Mailer was greatly perturbed by the state of society after the Second World War. Apart from living under the constant fear of painful death, the crisis of death-in-life was also to be faced. In the years of conformity and depression when Americans were overcome by an acute fear of the authority and suffered from 'collective failure of nerve', Mailer's philosophy offered a solution for survival amidst such debilitating realities.

Richard Foster observes "Life threatened in our times by the forces of death is Mailer's subject everywhere." Having accepted the fact of death, Mailer emphasizes the growth and survival of the self. He regards hipster as "a collection of possibilities" that have to be realised for "one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same."

Mailer is in favour of opposing this death-like quality of life in modern society by a firm faith in religious ideals: "To be a real existentialist, one must be religious ..." His visionary philosophy of 'mysticism of flesh' has made spiritual and sexual experiences mutually inseparable. For Mailer sex has become, feels Helen Weinberg, "an extended metaphor for vitality of spirit." (128). In his view, sexual instincts hold the key to survival:

"But to be with it is to have grace, is to be closer to the secrets of that inner unconscious life which will nourish you if you can hear it, for you are then nearer to that God which every hipster believes is located in the sense of his body" (*Advertisements* 283). Sex, here, assumes transcendental significance and 'just beyond the next wave of this 'apocalyptic orgasm' resides Mailer's God as 'the unachievable whisper of mystery' (*Advertisements* 351). In Mailer's vision, God is associated with the instinctual and the inspirational whereas the antithetical devil is linked with professional and institutional knowledge; "to learn from an inner voice the first time it speaks to us is a small bold existential act for it depends upon following one's instincts which must derive from God whereas Institutional knowledge is appropriated by the devil (*The Presidential Papers*). Mailer deems human beings to be 'the most important part of His great expression, the seed carriers, the voyagers, the explorers, and the embodiment of God's embattled vision. Both God and Man are engaged in their heroic battle of survival following inspirational and institutional path. Thus, this philosophy of American Existentialism acquires transcendental leanings also.

Mailer's fictional corpus bears out the evolution of his philosophical vision on one hand and the exposition of his distinctive strategy of survival on the other. An analysis of his novels ratifies the emergence of his main protagonist, carrying out 'the heroic battle', into a 'survivor.'

### Mailer's Fictional World

Mailer's very first novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) was well received by the critics and the reading public and immediately established itself as the best American novel about the Second World War. The novel that was "written mechanically" as "the work of a young engineer" is apparently preoccupied with the political discussions between Fascism and liberalism but underneath it is a philosophical debate about man's physical drives, psychic needs and capability for heroic survival. Besides, Mailer has commented that "the basic theme is the conflict between the beast and the seer in man,"

The major characters in the novel represent a cross-section of the society. The narrative detailing the invasion of Anopopei presents a war for survival being waged against two enemies - the army and nature. Nature with its calamities like storms, intense heat and unsurmountable terrain checks the physical strength and stamina and the army presents a well-organized and efficiently ruled society which is as much confident of its power as nature itself. The nature looms large as a threatening force ready to engulf man with pain, fear and death. The army, too, exercises the same effect by causing moral destruction and breaking the individual's will. Thus physical survival depends upon strength, resourcefulness and determination and spiritual survival depends on inner resistance. The novel thus succeeds in exploring a terrain which eventually becomes the testing ground of Mailer's intellectual beliefs concerning survival on this planet.

*Barbary Shore* (1951) was not as well received by the critics as its predecessor but Howard Harper calls it "a much deeper, more fascinating, and less mechanical book." Herein Mailer has tried to capture "the air of our time, authority and nihilism stalking one another in the orgiastic hollow of this century" (*Advertisements* 94). The main protagonist, Michael Lovett, an intellectual rendered amnesiac due to an explosion in the World War II, has leased a room in a boarding house at Brooklyn Heights to begin work on his new novel but instead of writing, he gets seriously involved in the lives and pasts of his fellow boarders.

The characters in *Barbary Shore* represent a microcosm of society. In Lovett, Mailer has presented a sensitive intellectual who has severed his links with the past but is anxious about the future. Lovett's quest is for satisfying personal relationships and sound political ideology as guiding vision. He makes this commitment by accepting McLeod as his mentor and adopting his ideal of "selfless friendship." It is through Lovett that Mailer suggests the hope and the way of survival in the modern American society and in Helen Weinberg's view Lovett foreshadows "the fully activist hero to come." As the narrative progresses, we see that his fond memories are of love which initially is 'profane' love, but he moves towards the ultimate ideal of "selfless friendship", having inherited the "little object" of hope. The two become the key to his own salvation and his salvation of others - "I must move on again... and I shall discover brothers where I thought none existed." However, *Barbary Shore* moves not only on the objective but also on the psychic level and events their psychic significance. Harper opines that here "Mailer goes much deeper into the psychic origins of behavior than in *The Naked and the Dead*" The novel presages the novelist's growing concern with the psychic circuit which ultimately came to be a paramount concern in Mailer's novels-

*The Deer Park* (1955) is an indictment and a critique of the psychopathic world of Hollywood on a literal plane and of America at a metaphorical plane. It fictionalizes the movement of the mankind towards a moral abyss. Desert - the pleasure resort in Hollywood is a symbolic setting against which the action unfolds and the novelist dramatizes the topsy-turvydom of values through lives and interpersonal relationships of various characters.

The healing touch that the hero Sergius is looking for, however, is elusive in the illusory world. Advice of a creative director advice to the would-be writer Sergius is, "...with the pride of the artist you must blow against the walls of every power that exists, the small trumpet of your defiance" (374). Sergius survives all sorts of traumas and temptations and in Richard Foster's words, "discerns in the very chemistry of the disease and decomposition the flicker and spur of new possibilities for life." (26)

Another important character in the novel is Marion Faye, a Pimp and pusher to the film world. This 'evil genius' has decided that to live in a rotten world one must become rotten, so he has chosen evil as his good. Faye's desire to change the corrupt ways of the world leads him to an apocalyptic vision of annihilation;

*So let it come, Faye thought, let this explosion come, and then another, and all the others, until the Sun God burned the earth.* (171)

Mailer endorses his hero's obsession with courage and action rather than sentiment as he knows that 'passive goodness' can never change the world. In the debilitating, desensitizing and disillusioning American reality, Marion Faye becomes the prototype of survivor. Although he carries his brand of ruthlessness to such an extent that it dehumanizes him but this is the 'vice' that will perhaps lead to 'nobility'.

Mailer has called *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) his 'best novel'. It is, indeed, remarkable for its coverage of the literary and political climate of the times and an affirmation of life. The protagonist D.J. alias Ranald, son of a Texas millionaire Rusty, is a popular rock-and-roll disc jockey. The hero D.J. and his friend Tex resolve to undertake a journey to the heart of wilderness to encounter a grizzly in his natural habitat. This incident is the pivot of the novel- They renounce their weapons and experience fear and ecstasy of equal combat with their environment. This close tryst with nature gives them their moments of realization. They are chased up to a tree by the bear, their nostrils filled with the dreadful murderous scent. In these natural surroundings, they also experience a natural urge for love. The mutual awareness of their urge for love and fratricide makes them ultimately attain a sense of solidarity and even purification. Thus D.J.'s heroic adventure in the lap of nature ends on this note of mystical brotherhood. In this novel, Mailer has tried to clinch the conflict between the beast and the seer and has objectified the violent impulse in man declaring that it stems from God himself. DJ and Tex realize that "God was a beast and not a man" (203). This metaphysical theme is interspersed with theme of socio-political conflict and the conflict between Man and Nature. D.T. goes through his own purification ceremony and comes out as a survivor who having overcome the dread of death, enlists himself in the Vietnam war.

*Ancient Evenings* (1983) "the most inventive and exuberant work" presents a strategy to survive that is at once mythic as well as existential. Here, Mailer has presented his morally exacting existential eschatology dramatized against Egyptian back-ground with Egyptian characters to show that one's ability to survive, death depends upon the value of one's life. The novel opens with Menenhetet Two, one of the two narrator heroes, struggling to recall his name and a few details about his life. Reduced to the condition of a cultural orphan, he has to face the existential crisis - justify the value of life and survive or fail the test of truth and "die forever" (32). He finds a guide and mentor in the ghost of his great grandfather Menenhetet One who narrates stories about the myths of the gods to give his great grandson spiritual education, Menenhetet Two finds these stories to be manna for his soul:

*it seemed to me as if nothing could be more important than to know these Gods well, as if, indeed, they could fill all that was empty in my marrow and so serve as true guides to the treacheries I would yet have to face in the Land of the Dead* (39-40).

Thereafter, Menenhetet gives an account of his four lives that imparts moral and cultural education to Menenhetet Two relating him to his mythic heritage. It is evident that Menenhetet Two has a divine lineage. Menenhetet One's recounting his story certainly helps Menenhetet Two who is at the end of it all neither morally ignorant nor feeling isolated. This knowledge and faith helps Menenhetet One and Two to merge into a single, enduring spiritual identity that juggles for a physical rebirth.

*Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984), 'a story of self-regeneration' (Joseph Wenke) brings together the amnesiac protagonist's quest for self and the elements of a detective novel. The resultant product is an existential mystery where the efforts to resolve the suspense shrouding a series of murders is also an effort to find a solution for the survival of the self. The crime becomes akin to the original sin whose investigation initiates a new beginning for the psychologically and spiritually exhausted protagonist. The narrative opens with a description of Tim Madden who has not only lost his memory but is in a state of despair. Deserted by wife and addicted to nicotine, he wakes up in a state of stupor and doubts whether he himself has murdered his wife. Mailer has paid a greater attention to the evolution of the protagonist and his method to overcome his dread that ultimately helps him in his survival. The solution of the murder mystery also becomes an instrument that helps in solving the enigma of existence. Madden's existential growth is facilitated by his father Dougy, the Tough Guy, and Madeleine Falco - both embodying the heroic code of the existential hero with considerable humanity. Madeleine is capable of 'moral radicalism' and kills her husband Regency knowing that otherwise he would never have allowed her to start a life with Madden. Madden also realises that murder was necessary to allow him to live a new life as his hard-won "stability of mind" does indeed rest "on the firm foundation of a mortal crime" (228). He wins his love and both Madden and Madeleine live together contentedly in Key West. Madden emerges as a survivor when he summons the courage to overcome his dread and reveals a capacity to love which, in Mailer's World, is rightly won through mortal crime.

*An American Dream* ranks fourth in Mailer's prolific canon but it fictionalizes the vision and the Philosophy of the novelist most comprehensively. Philip H. Buftis considers *An American Dream* a "radical departure" from Mailer's earlier novels for herein the role of literature becomes "one of mystic release and revelation." Cast on the lines of hipster of American Existentialism, the protagonist Stephen Rojack is Mailer's prototype of his finally emerging survivor. It is in here that Mailer shifts the onus on to courage and psychic experiences - the two concepts which have governed his later survivors till *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, his last fictional work. Besides, Rojack becomes the spokesman of the Age and the writer for in the novelist's view modern age is essentially a psychopathic age and modern man is inevitably a psychopath. By presenting a psychopath as the central figure of the novel, the novelist has suggested his strategy of survival in such modern times. In fact, *The American Dream* is Mailer's attempt to fictionally present the wastelandish

American reality at a literal as well as metaphorical level which he had conceptualised earlier in his *The Presidential Papers*:

*Since the First World War Americans have been leading a double life and our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground, there has been the history of politics which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull if not for the consequences of the actions of some of these men; and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation.* (51)

By the time of *An American Dream* Mailer had grown more interested in penetrating into the psychic reality along with the social. He has filtered the action taking place in American city through the mind of the protagonist of the novel, Stephen Richards Rojack. Rojack, confronts the violent and psychopathic elements of American reality, experiences the dilemma of good versus evil and combats the indefinable supernatural and surrealistic forces to evolve a strategy of survival wading through these complex levels of existence. All throughout, the narrative takes place at the physical and psychic levels as the protagonist carries his struggle for survival from one realm into another.

In the last scene of the novel, Mailer has brought all threads together to achieve the final synthesis. The action moves on two planes of the physical and the metaphorical reality. Rojack's decision to walk out in the desert to look at the moon is but an inevitable step in his final battle to emerge as a survivor. All the negative and positive influences have been clubbed together. In fact, it is his closest tryst with death and dread in the desert where he finds himself most vulnerable. But he comes out unscathed and alive succumbing neither to suicide nor to death. This, in fact, is the crossing of the Rubicon as to his relief, the all-along haunting fear of death finally leaves the protagonist and in accordance with Mailer's existentialist vision he comes to accept the terms of death and learns to live with death without dread and fear.

Rojack has also been endowed with a capability to perceive psychic experience and to receive and send psychic messages. In his last experience he has a telephonic conversation with his demised love - Cherry, whose 'lovely voice' assures him of the benevolence of moon whom she calls 'a mother to me'. This is a further step in his attaining of equilibrium by coming to terms with hostile outside forces - an important presence in Mailer's world. A psychic redemption has taken place, 'a New Man' has been born and it becomes all but evident next morning as he feels 'something like sane again' and sets out on a trip to Guatemala and Yucatan and thus Rojack, beginning as a psychotic, gradually seems to grow saner. Thus, in his struggle against death, despair, insanity and evil, Rojack emerges out as a sane survivor - a psychic existentialist who is finally purged and initiated enough to take on life on his own terms. In Rojack, Mailer has incarnated his New Man - an intellectual attuned to his non-rational being who the novelist hopes will emerge to prevail.

In *Cannibals and Christians* Norman Mailer lodged his protest that Bellow has not tried "to seize the temper of our time and turn it" (158) - the task which he himself has undertaken to accomplish through his writings. He has portrayed the spiritual and cultural quagmire of the American society at the macro-level and individual's struggle for survival in such surroundings at the micro-level. For the novelist the means of bringing a revolution in the consciousness of our time is an individual being, as the transformation is at the level of self rather than the society.

## Conclusion

In Mailer's view, the human condition is essentially existential and survival is possible through psychic redemption that can bring peace within and without. For this purpose, Mailer lays emphasis on intuition and instinct rather than logic and reason and advocates resuscitation of primal psychic circuit. The perusal of his novels suggests that Mailer's survivor is a psychic-existentialist survivor. Mailer's strategy of survival seems to be progressing through contradictions where in his quest to become 'holy' and 'whole', his survivor passes through sin to salvation and woos to attain God. At its root lies Mailer's faith that when every social restraint is removed, "man would then prove to be more creative than murderous." (*Advertisement* 233) The novelist has chosen his protagonists as men of courage and action because only the passionate virtuosity of such people can bring the revolution in the consciousness of our time. In fact, Mailer - 'the prophet' has propounded his own kind of New Morality which aims at creation of a New Man who, purged from his despair, fear, dread of death, hatred and madness, sets his foot on the path of hope, fearlessness, freedom, love and sanity. Laura Adams has offered a penetrating insight into Mailer's vision when she observes that Mailer's hero learns to handle evil not simply to survive but in order to become good and to create goodness around him. The study of his fictional corpus reveals an essentially syncretic vision where both God and Devil exist and Man, His seed carrier, continues to be involved in a 'heroic activity' and not a mean one of surviving and evolving in the afflicted American world.

## Works Cited :

1. Adams, Laura. *Existential Battles*. Ohio University Press, 1976, p.80.
2. Bloom, Harold, editor. "Introduction." *Norman Mailer*. Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, p.5.
3. Bufithis, Philip. *Norman Mailer*. Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978, p 73.
4. Ehrlich, Robert. *Norman Mailer: The Radical Hipster*, The Scarecrow Press, 1978, p.83.
5. Gutman, S.T. *Mankind in Barbary: the Individual and Society in the Novels of Norman Mailer*. University Press of New England, 1975, p.131.
6. Harold Bloom, editor. "Introduction." *Norman Mailer*. Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, p.5.
7. MacConell, Frank D. *Four Postwar American Novelists : Bellow, Mailer, Barth and Pynchon*. Chicago University Press, 1977, p.61.



8. Mailer, Norman. *The Naked and the Dead*. Rineheart ,1948, p.189.  
----- *Barbary Shore*. Rineheart and Company, 1951, p.290.  
----- *The Deer Park* .G.P. Putnam's Sons,1955.  
----- *Advertisements for Myself*. G. ,P. Putnam's,1959,pp.15,308-9,  
----- *The Art Of Fiction*. xxxii ,*The Paris Review*, VIII ,Winter- Spring ,1964,pp.50,58.  
----- *The Presidential Papers*. G.P.Putnam's Sons, 1963,p.51.  
----- *Why Are We in Vietnam ?* G.P.Putnam's Sons,1967, p.140.  
----- *The Armies Of the Night*. Penguin Books,1970, p.32.  
----- *Ancient Evenings*. Macmillan,1983,p.283.  
----- *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Michael Joseph,1984 ,p.226.
8. Poirier,Richard. *Norman Mailer* . Edited by Harold Bloom.p.4.
- 9.Toback,James."Norman Mailer Today." *Commentary* , vol.44,no.4,oct.1967, p. 76.
- 10.Weinberg, Helen. *The New Novel in America:The Kafkan Mode in Contemporary Fiction* .Cornell University Press,1970,p.128.
- 11.Wenke, Joseph. *Mailer's America*. University Press of New England,1987,p.230.